

7.12.08: Lt. Gov. Garamendi reassures Ridge

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By Jennifer Barker
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California's Lt. Governor John Garamendi visited Butte County yesterday morning to receive an update from firefighters battling the blaze and to share a message of appreciation to the firefighters and volunteers who have worked together during this state of emergency.

CAL FIRE Incident Commander George Morris briefed fire crews and the media at the press conference at the Silver Dollar Fair Grounds incident command center. Morris said Thursday night the wind didn't increase as much as expected leading to fairly manageable conditions. Firefighters had the Camp Fire tied down in the Feather River drainage.

If the fire were to jump the drainage now, instead of a 4-mile-long fire pushing into town, small spot fires would hit the community, Morris said. While Paradise is not out of the woods, Morris said everyday the fire doesn't jump the drainage is a plus.

Garamendi said this is just the beginning of the fire season and California needs more resources. Wednesday, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger sent a letter to the president asking for more resources, he said. Kelly Huston, deputy director of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services, said the fire has become internationally known. Fire crews from Canada have joined the fight, and Mexico, Australia and New Zealand have offered their resources.

Huston said countries want to help California because of the state's reputation for assisting other states and countries during emergencies.

"They see us in a time of need and they're responding," Huston said.

Garamendi said California has faced 1,700 fires in a month and most have been managed through multiple agency cooperation.

"The support of the mutual aid system does work," he said.

While fire crews throughout the country have come to Butte County's aid, the fire is challenging for crews accustomed to working in rolling hills or structure fires. Instead they're facing fires in areas like the Feather River drainage with cliffs and forests.

"This is an extraordinary event for California," he said.

Garamendi assured the fire crews at the briefing that the state is doing everything it can to work with the federal government to increase the level of emergency status to receive more federal resources. Huston said California is currently receiving the Fire Management Assistant Grant but the governor is asking for a higher emergency status level to give added assistance to the fire victims.

"The effect on individuals is extraordinary," Garamendi said.

He thanked the volunteers for the assistance and the many businesses and groups that have donated to the fire victims. Garamendi highlighted Grocery Outlet. The owners of the Paradise Grocery Outlet started donating water and food to the evacuees. They contacted the company co-CEO Eric Lindberg, Jr. for assistance. Grocery Outlet has now given \$30,000 worth of food and water to the evacuees at the shelters.

"Grocery Outlet worked hard and generously," Garamendi said. "That kind of community outreach isn't unique to Grocery Outlet."

Garamendi also delivered a message on disaster preparedness.

"The fact of the matter is that Californians have to be prepared," he said.

He listed four simple ways residents can prepare for a fire. He said residents need to have enough insurance coverage to rebuild their home. It is also important to make homes fire safe and have the required 100 feet of defensible space. He said that defensible space can save homes. In addition to making homes fire safe, homes should be built in a fire safe way. He advised residents not to use wooden shingles and emphasized the importance of cleaning the gutters. Finally, he stressed the value of being prepared to evacuate. He advised residents to think ahead and put valuables in a safe location, easy to gather.

"Take those valuables, things like your husband and put him in the car," Garamendi joked.

On a more serious note, he advised residents to take pictures or video of their home. If residents record their belongings the insurance claim process will be easier. Congressman Wally Herger also addressed the audience. He thanked the many agencies who have worked together to fight the Butte Lightning Complex.

"I want to commend everyone the cooperation from everyone, everyone working together," Herger said, adding that firefighters came from all over and California will be forever grateful.

Butte County Supervisors Kim Yamaguchi, Jane Dolan and Maureen Kirk also thanked the fire crews and volunteers for their efforts to contain the blaze.

Yamaguchi said the citizens of Butte County and the surrounding areas have shown a "spirited effort."

Dolan said, "I have been amazed by the volunteer effort (it's) truly the American spirit."

Yamaguchi also thanked Garamendi for visiting the county, though he wished it could have been under different circumstances.

"(It's) not the attention that we want, but we do appreciate it," he said.

Town Manager Chuck Rough said after another calm night Thursday, the town is hopeful and optimistic.

"Real progress (was) made," Rough said. Rough said the Humboldt Fire was an eye-opening experience, which brought a state of alertness to the town.

He commended the volunteer effort and the multiple agency cooperation. After the press conference, Garamendi toured the evacuee shelters. At the Neighborhood Church he and Town Councilman Scott Lotter thanked the residents for having the good sense to evacuate when living in an immediate threat area.

"I want to applaud you for taking the advice," Lotter said.

Morris assured the evacuees that fire crews are doing everything they can to protect homes.

"Your homes are in good hands (there are) lots of people on this doing a tremendous job," Morris said. He added that he's seen a terrific community effort and he is proud to be a resident of Butte County.